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Beyond Sex Education:

How Adults Relate to Children's Sensuality

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Running Head: Beyond Sex Education

Abstract

Current cultural attitudes toward children's sexuality resemble attitudes toward adults' sexuality; there is an emphasis on purely genital and orgasmic pleasure. Adults and children need warmth, physical contact, and a sense of belonging for which genital stimulation may be unnecessary or inappropriate. Children's sexual advances to adults, as well as adults' sexual attraction to children is re-interpreted in the broader perspective of love and affection in human relationships. It is suggested that adults learn to accept and recognize their own, and children's feelings of arousal, while firmly setting limits on mutual sexual behavior. This approach, coupled with warm, non-sexual physical contact between adults and children, is an essential accompaniment to the sex education curriculum.

"...full and frank information on sex should be available for children, but not as a thing so much as a part of the children's relationship to known and trusted people. Education is no substitute for individual exploration and realization."

D. W. Winnicott^{*}

* From D. W. Winnicott, The Child, the Family and the Outside World. Penguin Books, 1964.

Beyond Sex Education:

How Adults Relate to Children's Sensuality

In America sex education is in an age of enlightenment. We have gathered much practical expertise about how best to approach the issue and information is being built into family life curricula at all levels of the educational system from nursery school to college. Educators are to be commended for this, and so are the parents and children who, by their acceptance, have demonstrated the need for these programs. The basic principles of sex education -- recognize the child's need for information, state the information in a simple but honest way, and be prepared for the child's sexual curiosity so as not to overreact when a question is asked -- have been proven effective in both home and school settings.

My purpose is not to criticize the sex education movement, but rather, to follow some of its implications to what I see as the next logical step. Typically, we address sex education to the child; after all, it is the child who has things to learn and adults already know it all. But in real life situations, sexual curiosity does not spring forth from a child solely on the basis of curiosity about his own body. The more usual pattern is that children first develop a curiosity about other people's bodies and want to find out if and why others' bodies are different from their own.

For example, young children get very interested in pregnancy. They want to know how it happens, what it is for, if they could get pregnant, etc. Children want to see and touch the sexual organs of their parents and compare them to their own. They would like to know what is under their teacher's

clothing and how that may be different from Mom's or Dad's.

Whereas sex education as a curriculum may satisfy certain desires for knowledge, the child is, in fantasy if not in fact, engaged in sexual relationships with the important adults and peers with whom he or she has regular contact. Adults, for their own part, have sexual fantasies about children. Children are, after all, soft and beautiful yet innocent and vulnerable. Sex education as information or as curricula seems insufficient to address these areas. We also need to understand the dimensions of our sexual relationship with children in order to put it into proper developmental perspective. The sexual arousal engendered by children -- too often denied or ignored -- could be used to add a dimension of warm, loving physical contact between adults and children.

Why is sex difficult to talk about?

In 1966 Dr. Mary Calderone, a noted sex educator, wrote that one of the biggest obstacles to effective sex education was the sexual attitudes of parents and teachers. Citing the findings of the research of Masters and Johnson, she noted that many adults were uncomfortable with their own sexuality and had failed to develop feelings of fulfillment in their sexual roles (Calderon, 1966). Leslie Farber, an outspoken critic of the Masters and Johnson research, wrote that part of the reason for the modern American adult's discomfort has to do with a cultural effort to dissect and isolate ordinary human experience into components which are conceptually, but not experientially, separate. Thus, in this century, orgasm has become the hallmark of successful sexual union, and little recognition is given to the

psychological and situational factors which intervene. Most ordinary adults need warmth, physical contact, and a sense of sharing for which orgasm may be an occasional, if not unnecessary, complement. Because of cultural attitudes, we are apt to feel like failures if our orgasm comes too soon, or too late, or if any of the stresses of ordinary human endeavor creep into the bedroom (Farber, 1966).

Margaret Mead made a similar point in her discussion of American sex role orientations. The movies, TV, the advertising media, magazines: all have created an ideal conception of maleness or femaleness which is pure, unblemished, direct, beautiful, and always finds fulfillment (Mead, 1967). In spite of recent attempts in film and TV to introduce hardship into life, most of us find comfort in these idealized tragedies since our own lives would never be so perfectly awful.

Just as sexual lovemaking does not seem complete without orgasm, physical contact of any kind carries with it an orgasmic penumbra. When two men touch, it is difficult to disassociate the affectionate gesture from covert homosexual fantasies. Physical contact with children is often burdened by cultural phantoms, particularly in the case of men and young boys. Can there be affectionate physical contact between adults and children which is neither devoid of emotion nor overtly sexual? We will return to this question after a brief excursion into the world of adult's sexual experience with children.

Children's Sexuality and Adult Sexual Excitement

Children of both sexes inspire sexual arousal in adults of both sexes. This is probably the least discussed, but one of the most common experiences

of adults working with children. This sexual arousal may result from children directly stimulating the adult's breast or genitals, or it may be sexual fantasies deriving from the adult's perception of the child's body.

Infants are birthed through the vagina and suckled from the mother's breast. In so doing, they stimulate the same tissues which were salient in the adult lovemaking from whence the infant was conceived. The sensual pleasures of giving birth and nursing were documented some years ago by Dr. Niles Newton (1973). I know from my own personal observations and other accounts from parents and teachers which I have collected over the years that this phenomenon continues well past infancy.

Preschool children of both sexes may unabashedly touch the genitals of either parent. In rough and tumble play with children of this age, there is ample opportunity for fortuitous contact of their bodies with adult genitals. Even quietly sitting on the adult's lap may offer opportunities for direct genital stimulation.

In pre-adolescent children the approach to adults' genitals becomes more sex typed. Boys may sit in an adult female's lap and attempt to fondle her breasts. Girls may try to clasp their legs around the adult male's legs or trunk. In these situations the child's overt sexual intent is hard to avoid. Adolescents no longer make direct contact with adults, but they may play coy or seductive games with adults of the opposite sex. Some popular films and books -- "Summer of '42" and "Lolita" -- have captured the universal adolescent fantasy to make love to an older man or woman. Adolescent fantasies are more often turned into reality than those of younger children

since adolescents are more physically mature. In Samona, it is the practice that a youth's first sexual encounter is typically with an older adult, not a peer (Mead, 1949).

Children may become objects of sexual excitement in more passive ways simply by virtue of their physical attractiveness. In her soliloquy in Ulysses, Molly dreams of a statue of a naked body, and of her wish to hold the penis and take it in her mouth (Joyce, 1967). Children are fair and soft, innocent yet willing. The urge to consumer them is often barely contained. The wish to touch and fondle them is irresistible. In our culture we confine our fondling to the child's non-sexual parts. There are some peoples of the world who routinely manipulate and massage the genitals of infants and young children for the avowed purpose of giving the child pleasure.

Finding Acceptable Forms of Adult-Child Physical Contact

Having exposed adult concupiscence, we may fall prey to taking one of two unlikely courses of action. Our fantasies could sink into shame, and to cope with our fear of exposure, we might avoid all physical contact with children. These shameful fears may be rationalized in the guise of protecting the welfare of the children. Some adults believe that even non-sexual physical contact will cause children to lose their innocence or develop homosexual or promiscuous tendencies. The child becomes a convenient sponge for our feelings of fear and shame. We hope the child can absorb them so fast that we never have to face them ourselves. Our conception of the child's innocence becomes a censor of our own powerful emotions.

At the other extreme, fantasy becomes reality when an adult loses

control over culturally imposed sexual inhibitions resulting in incest, child molestation, or pedophilia. Richard Farson (1974) reports one current estimate that one in every ten Americans have been involved in incest (Woodbury & Schwartz, 1971); a minority, but one of significant proportions. A number of authors have made a case in defense of sexual freedom for children. Farson (1974) and Shulamith Firestone (1970) believe that children should be free to engage in sexual relationships with each other, and Farson argues for adult-child sexual relations so long as children give their willful consent.

I will not discuss the issue of sexual relations between children, although some positive and negative points can be raised. I am unequivocally opposed to sex between adults and children. As I see it, the issue is both a scientific and a moral issue. A scientific study on the developmental effects of adult-child sexual relations would be hard to come by. Farson cites a number of conclusions from follow-up studies on children who had "willingly" engaged in incest with the opposite sex parent. Christopher Bagley (1969) of the Institute of Psychiatry in London found that these children did not have any "natural revulsion" to incest and that their problems came in relation to the way they were accepted by the culture at large. Karl Menninger reported a study in which it was found that willing incest seemed to favor, rather than inhibit, the development of social capacities (Menninger, 1942). Menninger, however, felt that the incestuous behavior of the adults was "criminal."

These studies are flawed for two basic reasons. The first is that the

sample of families who engaged in incest was self-selected; there was no random assignment to incest vs. non-incest groups. Naturally that kind of rigorous research becomes an ethical absurdity. So those studies can only address the effects of incest on children whose families were inclined to engage in incest in the first place; the research says nothing about the effects of incest on children in general. The second flaw has to do with the determination of the child's "willingness" to engage in sex with the adult. Most child development specialists would argue that "will" in young children is closer to compliance than it is to freedom. Children invest a great deal of energy creating propitious sentiments in the adults around them. Not only do children act in ways which they think are expected of them, they actually believe in a universe in which other people, animals, even inanimate objects, have a will in relation to which the child perceives himself as heteronomous (Piaget, 1965).

If children have a right to education, to information, to non-discrimination, to justice, health and freedom from punishment, it could be argued that my conservative position on sexual relations is anti-children's rights. Children, however, are not adults, and any discussion of their rights needs to be opened to their special vulnerabilities. If children have any rights with respect to pedophilia, it is the right to protection from it.

The majority of responses to children's sensuality fall somewhere between these two extremes, but the situation may be complicated by an adult's ambivalence. What is the appropriate course of action? How can we control the child's sexual impulses without suffocating his healthy curiosity?

Is there a way in which an adult can help meet a child's sexual needs? If I stop the child from exploring my body, what kind of attitude am I communicating about openness to these matters? What does my response say about how I accept my own sexuality?

I feel that we can come closer to resolving these issues by first grappling with our own feelings of sexual attraction for children. I am not suggesting that we come out of the closet to declare our inclinations toward sexual relationships with children. Indeed, sexual attraction to children is closer to philoprogenitiveness than it is to pedophilia; sexual desire and fantasy are inseparable from feelings of love and affection.

Having a clear sense of our own sexual arousal, we can then make judgments about its appropriateness and significance in a given situation. Sex is often bound up with other desires such as the need to possess or to be possessed or the need to give or receive affection and comfort. These needs are important aspects of any human relationship. However, it is important to distinguish the need for affection and comfort from purely sexual needs. To be sure, these complexities are apparent in adult lovemaking. Children need to learn that this kind of unification is to be reserved for them in their future and that their current sexual desires for adults are partly a wish to be a part of the adult world. Bruno Bettelheim (1977) suggested that the fairy tale is a comforting sexual allegory for the child. In the story, the individual with whom the child identifies is usually troubled by a wicked or dead parent (of the same sex) and allowed to assist the living parent by simply being a vulnerable child. The hero or heroine is then

subjected to many years of difficult trials after which he or she can rescue the wronged parent and establish a mature relationship with a member of the opposite sex (the prince or princess).

How can we communicate this to the children we work with? Reading them fairy tales helps. I think that taking every opportunity to develop a non-sexual physical relationship also helps. The adult's assurance that her own and the child's needs for physical affection are being met regularly makes it easier to set limits on purely sexual contact. The mechanics of carrying out the limit setting derives from our current approaches to discipline (see, for example, Ginott, 1965).

The basic rule is to accept and to overtly recognize the child's need for sexual stimulation, his feelings of arousal and his desire to consummate those needs with you. One sets limits on the behavior only, not on the emotional and motivating forces behind the behavior. In response to a child's exploratory attempts to fondle the adult, the adult might say: "I know that feels good to you, but I do not like it when you do that" or "I can see you really want to feel my breasts; you can touch my face or hands, but my breasts are private. Perhaps when you grow up you will find a wife to share these feelings with." There are endless variants to this technique. The important elements are recognition of the child's need, limit setting, and provision of some alternative way to meet the needs, either in fantasy (as suggested in the last example) or in reality. One might have provided this child with a book showing female's breasts and genitals explicitly and describing the function of breast stimulation in adult sexual relations. The

need for good, honest sex education texts becomes very important here.

It is essential to recognize that children can and do become sexually aroused and they need culturally appropriate outlets for these feelings. It is also important to recognize that as adults, we need not feel threatened or afraid of children's sexual advances: the child will calm down as soon as he becomes aware that you recognize what he feels and wants. If we feel threatened by a child's sensuality, it is probably because we are threatened by our own feelings of arousal, or the fantasies engendered by those feelings, or by our own uncertainties about the meaning that our behavior has for the child.

It may be comforting to the adult to realize that sanctioning behavior does not pervert or distort the child's psychological development, so long as it is done in the context of genuine empathy for the child's feelings and desires, and so long as the child feels that his lust for adults is a natural, acceptable and exciting part of growing up. The additional comfort that a child derives from a warm physical relationship with an adult -- in which physical contact is shared at times when sexual arousal is low -- can increase the child's acceptance of the adult's need to limit the child's access to his or her body. The adult's acceptance of his or her own sensuality and feelings of arousal should lead to an acceptance of like inclinations in the child, but not to overt adult-child sexual exchange.

Children are not fully capable of dealing with mature sexuality. The reality can be frightening and debilitating. Their sexual behavior is not what it seems, but rather, a form of self-discovery. Children are attempting

to see how they are the same or different from others in mind and body. The preschooler's desire to marry the opposite sex parent can be interpreted as a phase in the development of the self (Erikson, 1950).

Children of this age are becoming aware of their physical independence from the parents, but still wish for an emotional bond to avoid feeling left out of the family. They accomplish this by imagining themselves as playing adult roles. They identify with the same sex parent and wish to take his or her place in the family. The sexual dynamics are only superficial, the real issue being the child's struggle to gain a sense of personal autonomy without losing his feelings of closeness to the family. The child needs warmth, comfort and love much more than any simple genital stimulation can provide. Our current view of the child is much like that of the adult which Farber (1966) saw hidden behind orgasmic ideology: a victim of psycho-sexual dismemberment.

Final Comments

In the last analysis the adult is struggling with the same personal issues. How can I remain autonomously sensual, how can I be comfortable with my body and enjoy my feelings of sexual arousal without alienating my child or endangering his psychosocial development? Is a classic irony: that which concerns us most about others is often that which is imminently menacing to ourselves.

Yet, human development is often powered by irony and paradox. The child has the disarming capacity to stir our deepest misgivings and in so doing, to make us again aware of long buried anguish. And often we adults

can use those unpremeditated stirrings in order to resolve some basic personal issues. As we endeavor to help a child deal with his or her sensuality, we may push ourselves to new levels of psychological growth. So long as the goals of sex education are written only in terms of the children, the subject is destined to become as lifeless and unexciting as the other, more academic subjects have become.

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